Faced with evidence of declining nurse numbers and high-profile failures in care quality, some NHS organisations are taking action. Kat Keogh reports

**Are NHS trusts finally getting the message about safe staffing levels?**

Nursing staff levels on the wards at Wrightington, Wigan and Leigh NHS Foundation Trust will soon be on show to patients and their visitors.

As part of a new scheme starting at the Greater Manchester trust’s three hospitals later this summer, a whiteboard on each ward will display how many nurses and healthcare assistants should be on duty – and how many actually are.

Its decision to make nursing staff levels public follows an announcement by Salford Royal NHS Foundation Trust last month that it was in the planning stages of a similar initiative.

Wrightington, Wigan and Leigh director of nursing Pauline Jones says the whiteboards were being introduced in a bid to be more open with patients about staff levels and to help managers identify which wards are understaffed.

She says: ‘The whiteboards will be the first thing patients and visitors see on a ward. We want to be transparent about our staffing.’

The trusts’ announcements are timely. Recent workforce statistics show that, despite a small increase recently, there are still more than 4,000 fewer NHS nursing posts in England than when the coalition government came to power three years ago.

NHS nurse numbers rose by 686 between May 2012 and February 2013. But the Health and Social Care Information Centre (HSCIS) figures also show that the number of whole-time equivalent, registered NHS nurses working in England – excluding midwives, school nurses and health visitors – fell from 281,431 in May 2010 to 277,294 in February this year.

**Seasonal fluctuation**

Queen Margaret University Edinburgh workforce expert James Buchan says the recent rise could be due to a ‘seasonal fluctuation’, such as newly qualified nurses starting work in the autumn.

He says: ‘This data reflects the fact that NHS trusts are looking to contain costs through reduced staffing numbers or by holding posts vacant. The data fluctuates month on month so not too much should be read into short-term fluctuations, but it is clear that since May 2010 there has been a staffing decline.’

In 2010, the RCN launched its Frontline First campaign to monitor job cuts in the health service as the NHS in England embarked on a drive to save £20 billion by 2015.

In April this year, the college claimed that 68,000 NHS posts in the UK are in danger of being cut by April 2015, adding that 8,842 nursing posts – including healthcare support workers, midwives, health visitors and school nurses – have already been lost since May 2010.

RCN head of policy Howard Catton says the figures were a ‘red alert’ in the face of an ageing nursing workforce and increased pressures on services.

He says: ‘The RCN has been saying for the past two years in our Frontline First campaign that the nursing workforce is shrinking.

‘The government tends to respond by saying that the number of clinical staff has increased overall or that it will train more GPs, when what it needs to do is address the nursing workforce issue specifically.’

Staffing levels emerged as a major concern for Nursing Standard readers in last month’s survey on how the NHS has fared since David Cameron became prime minister.

Of the 1,700 nurses who responded to the survey, nearly two thirds said they did not feel there were enough staff to provide a safe level of care to patients on their last shift.

‘Changing patient demand’ leads to staffing review

An NHS trust in England is starting a review of its nurse-to-patient ratios this week to determine whether its staffing levels are safe.

Doncaster and Bassetlaw Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust will analyse data on patient acuity and demand from the past 12 months and use a range of staffing tools to assess whether nurse-to-patient ratios or skill mix need to be reviewed.

A full report on the review’s findings with recommendations will be presented to the trust’s board later this summer.

The trust’s deputy director of nursing Deborah Oughtibridge says the review was necessary to cope with changing patient demand.

The trust also plans to implement a ‘proactive’ rolling programme for recruiting nurses by using turnover rates for each banding to forecast how many might need to be recruited. It hopes that this will reduce the reliance on agency staff to cover vacancies.
Nine out of ten respondents also backed calls for minimum staff-to-patient ratios, a move recommended by Robert Francis in his report into care failings at Mid Staffordshire NHS Foundation Trust.

A national safe staffing alliance of senior nurses called Safe and Sound was formed as part of Nursing Standard’s Care campaign in January and is calling for minimum staff-to-patient ratios to be enforced across England.

The alliance has warned that ‘under no circumstances’ should registered nurse-to-patient levels on wards fall to 1:8 during the day.

Yet health minister Dan Poulter believes it is up to individual hospitals to decide how many nurses they employ. He says: ‘Nursing leaders have been clear that hospitals should publish staffing details and the evidence to show that staff numbers are right for the care needs of the patients that they look after.’

Dr Poulter says the new chief inspector of hospitals appointed by the Care Quality Commission would ‘take action’ against any hospitals found to be compromising patient care by not having the right number of staff on wards. It remains to be seen what form this action will take.

**Delay retirement**

A government-commissioned report by the Centre for Workforce Intelligence (CfWI) looking at nursing and midwifery numbers is expected to be published in the coming weeks.

The report will predict how the profession will fare for the next 20 years. Nursing Standard understands that it will say the number of nurses in England could fall by between 3,480 and 63,800 within three years.

Speaking at a nursing conference in February, CfWI chief executive Peter Sharp urged NHS bosses to find ways of recruiting more nurses, reducing the number of nurses who leave the UK to work overseas and encouraging older staff to delay retirement.

A CfWI spokesperson later told Nursing Standard there is a ‘possible reservoir’ of thousands of nurses who are registered but not working. ‘It is the decisions that providers and commissioners take now that will dictate whether there is a shortage or oversupply of nurses in the future.’

Figures obtained by Nursing Standard show there are 6,063 fewer nurse training places in the UK for 2013/14 than there were in 2009/10.

Despite the overall drop in nursing numbers and training places, some organisations are recruiting.

Guy’s and St Thomas’ Foundation Trust in London is looking to appoint 300 more nurses, while Wrightington, Wigan and Leigh NHS Foundation Trust earmarked £2.1 million to boost nursing staff numbers in 2012.

Ms Jones says: ‘Post-Francis, everyone will be looking at recruitment. By securing extra staff, hospitals will become safer and morale will be boosted’